

Modernization of Primary Education in the Ottoman State and The Jews of Turkey

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MODERNIZATION OF PRIMARY EDUCATION IN THE OTTOMAN STATE AND THE JEWS OF TURKEY

Author

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the Ottoman Empire and the Jews started in the 16th century. In the 15th century, Jews in Europe were expelled from England, France and the Iberian peninsula due to “anti-Semitism”. In addition to the local Jews living on the territory of the Ottoman Empire, those expelled from Europe settled in these lands in a free environment. They established a solid relationship with the Turks based on trust. Especially apart from those coming from most parts of the world, Sephardim Jews formed the innovative society of the state with their intellectual character. The Jews, who used to have banking and trade, lost their powerful positions to Greeks and Armenians over time. They declined in the 19th century. Education focused on traditional religious education started to change in terms of primary education. In particular, the reformist Jewish organization Alliance Israelite Universelle and the schools established by missionaries from abroad began to provide western-style education in the 19th century. The Ottoman Empire collapsed at the end of the Balkan Wars and the First World War. The Republic of Turkey was established in its place. In this process, the primary education policy of the Jews in these lands, the transformation of the education system, the schools they opened and their cultural identities were revealed. The events affecting knowledge production and change were revealed with the perspective of basic education.

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1. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE JEWS IN THE OTTOMAN STATE

Primary education is an important building block in terms of basic education policy of societies and their own transformation and knowledge production. In order for individuals to provide added value to their own society or country, the cycle of trained people comes to the fore. The subject of primary education should be examined elaborately. In this context, the educational adventure of the Jews developed very differently compared to other nations. Especially their homeland nonexistence and the fact that they lived under the rule of other countries changed the education systems they established according to the region. Generally, they kept their cultures alive under the auspices of tolerant countries. Because of their Jewish belief, living in the shadows of societies that believed in Christianity and Islam caused them to encounter difficulties. The exile of the Jews from England and then France and the Iberian peninsula due to the “anti-Semitism” that started in Europe in the thirteenth century caused them to come to the Ottoman Empire, which had a tolerant structure and was the powerful state of the period. The education system of the Jews, who lived peacefully as an Ottoman community for many years from the 15th century, was also free in these lands. As long as they obeyed the norms of the state, they could implement the curriculum they wanted and live their own culture.¹

The Jews who were forced into exile from the Iberian peninsula (Spain and Portugal) became a part of the Ottoman Empire, especially with their intellectual identities and cultural units. Thanks to the powerful ruling of the Ottoman Empire, they had the opportunity to live in a comfortable environment for many years. Apart from the Sephardim Jews who came from the Iberi-

¹ Yavuz Ercan, *Osmanlı Yönetiminde Gayrimüslimler, Kuruluşundan Tanzimat'a Kadar Sosyal, Ekonomik ve Hukuki Durumları*, Ankara: Turhan Kitapevi, 2001, s. 1-50.

an Peninsula, there were also those who lived in these lands under the Roman and Byzantine rule. There were also Eastern and Western Jewish communities in the Middle East, and Ashkenazi Jews from various parts of Europe. There was no unity in the education system of these communities, which lived dispersedly in the Ottoman lands. On the subject of basic education, a religious-based curriculum was implemented in a room where the rabbis taught next to the synagogues. In addition to a traditional education, four arithmetical operations were taught with Hebrew lessons.²

In the 19th century, the education systems of Europe and the Ottoman Empire began to change with the effects of both the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. Primary schools have become important in terms of knowledge transformation of countries and qualified manpower. The Greeks and Armenians from the Ottoman communities followed these developments closely and quickly adapted to the innovations. However, the Jews did not react to this change at first because they had isolated themselves. With the Reorganization [Tanzimat] and Reform [Islahat] Edicts, the Ottoman Empire had legalized a free environment for non-Muslim communities. While countless schools were opened in every region of the country, Jews continued to educate their own children with traditional educational institutions. However, change was inevitable. First, British missionaries opened schools for Jews in Izmir and Istanbul. Apart from these missionaries, Jews in Europe completed the AIU organization and stepped into the Ottoman lands. Local people and rabbis resisted those who wanted to establish cultural organization from abroad. Thus began the struggle between the reformists and the traditional wing among the Jews. The rabbis did not want to lose their power, while the reformists believed that they could develop

² Stanford J. Shaw, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda ve Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nde Yahudiler*, İstanbul: Melisa Matbaacılık, 2008, s. 1-71.

with Western-style education. In addition, the financial resources of the imported culture from the West were provided by wealthy Jews. AIU schools also began to be opened rapidly in every region of the country, and by the beginning of the 20th century, their number exceeded a hundred. Schools that implemented the curriculum they wanted within the framework of educational freedom also came to the fore in French language thanks to the support of France.³

³ Aron Rodrigue, *Türkiye Yahudilerinin Batılılaşması*, Ankara: Ayraç Yayınları, 1997, s. 75-168.